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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001276

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/SINGH

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TAGS: [IR](#) [IS](#) [LE](#) [PARM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#)
SUBJECT: MGLE01: SPEAKER BERRI GIVES PREVIEW OF NATIONAL
DIALOGUE; DEFENDS IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) In an April 25 meeting with the Ambassador and econoff, Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri said that Foreign Minister Fawzi Salloukh was happy with Prime Minister Siniora's visit to Washington last week. When the Ambassador asked why Salloukh maintained an unpleasant expression the whole trip, Berri said that he was upset about an unrelated ministry issue. Turning to the national dialogue scheduled to resume April 28, Berri did not expect any progress on the presidency. He said he intended to cut off the discussion after an hour if no consensus is reached and declare the topic closed. Then the dialogue would move on to Hizballah's arms, a topic which Berri said was easier because it had "many exits." Berri said he would be open to future national dialogue sessions as needed, but not to discuss economic reform. He claimed he would back whomever the Patriarch selected for the presidency. Regarding his recent trip to Iran, Berri described Iranian President Ahmadinejad as impressive and willing to engage in a dialogue with the USG. Berri defended his public statements in favor in Iran's nuclear program, using Israel's purported nuclear arsenal as a justification. In his discussions with Ahmadinejad, Berri got the impression that Iran does not care if its nuclear program leads to international isolation. End summary.

SALLOUKH HAPPY WITH
WASHINGTON VISIT?

2. (C) On April 25, the Ambassador and econoff met with Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri. The Ambassador began by briefing Berri on Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's visit to Washington last week. Berri said he had received a briefing from Foreign Minister (and Amal-Hizballah ally) Fawzi Salloukh. Salloukh told Berri that the visit was good, the Americans were very nice, and the welcome was generous. The Ambassador agreed that Siniora's visit was very successful, but expressed surprise at Salloukh's positive report on the trip given that Salloukh wore a sour face for virtually the whole trip. Berri explained that Salloukh was indeed satisfied with the visit. According to Berri, Salloukh was upset about an unrelated issue. Siniora and President Emile Lahoud could not agree on new ambassadors, so now Lebanon was left without ambassadors to some of its most important posts, including Washington, New York (United Nations), London, and Tokyo. (Comment: Technically, of course, Lebanon has an ambassador in Washington -- a discredited, odious one who was ordered out of town temporarily before Siniora's arrival, lest his unwelcome presence mar the PM's visit. And Jihad

Mortada isn't scheduled to leave London until the summer. But we didn't dispute Berri's basic point that ambassadorial assignments need to be made. End comment.)

LOW EXPECTATIONS FOR NATIONAL DIALOGUE -----

13. (C) Turning to the national dialogue set to resume on April 28 under Berri's sponsorship, Berri said he did not expect progress on the presidency. "I am afraid of April 28, I don't know how we will deal with it." Berri explained that he understood MP Michel Aoun would not budge on his demand for the presidency while March 14 would never accept Aoun. Berri claimed he would allow the discussion on the presidency to last one hour, and then announce that if the participants cannot come to an agreement, then the discussion is closed. Berri will then push the dialogue into the next topic: Hizballah's arms. The Ambassador asked why Berri considered the issue of Hizballah's arms to be an easier issue than the presidency. Berri replied that there were "many exits" on the arms issue.

14. (C) Berri did not expect the dialogue session to continue into the weekend. He said that he would be open to future sessions as needed, but not to discuss economic reforms. That is what parliament is for, Berri explained. The Ambassador inquired why Berri had chosen a Friday night for the upcoming national dialogue session. This would shut down the upscale "Solidere" area and cost restaurants, shops, and cafes on their busiest night. Berri chortled: "This is just one night. They are always complaining. Everyone in Lebanon wants something for nothing."

BEIRUT 00001276 002 OF 002

15. (C) Going in greater detail on the presidency issue, Berri claimed he had been approached by both Aoun and MP Saad Hariri. Aoun asked Berri if he could confirm rumors that social butterfly Michel Edde was a serious contender for the presidency. Berri, with a tinkle in his eye, said he told Aoun the rumors were true, and that he supported Edde for president because then there would be stability for 12 years. Berri, delivering the punchline to a probably unamused Aoun, clarified that it would take the verbose Edde six years to finish making his inaugural speech and six years for everyone else to respond. Berri claimed that Hariri had mentioned to him only one name: former MP Nassib Lahoud. Berri told Hariri that if he asked President Lahoud to step down in favor of Nassib, "he would kill me." Berri said his reply to Hariri was to come back with several names so Berri could have input, too. Berri insisted that it was he, not the March 14 backers, who was keeping Boutros Harb's candidacy alive. In any event, Berri said he backed whomever Maronite Patriarch Sfeir selected. The Ambassador pointed out that Sfeir is characteristically opaque and might not ever make a selection. Berri replied, without humility, that the Maronites must be like the Shia when they unanimously backed Berri for Speaker in 2005.

VISIT TO IRAN -----

16. (C) Berri, saying that he, too, had been traveling in mid-April, gave a read-out of his recent trip to Iran. Following a conference of Muslim parliaments in Istanbul, Berri traveled to Tehran for a conference on Palestine and Jerusalem. He noted that gas in Turkey cost USD 45 per 20 liters and only USD 1.50 per 20 liters in Iran. The conference was attended by Iranian President Ahmadinejad, the Ayatollah Khamenei, PFLP-GC leader Ahmad Jibril, and PIJ and Hamas officials. Berri talked with officials of the Palestinian militant groups telling them they must stay united or they will lose everything to Israel. Berri intimated to the Ambassador that although he favored Fatah, he believed that Fatah and Hamas must work together.

17. (C) Berri's statements about Iran's nuclear program during his trip made headlines in Lebanon. Berri did not back away from his comments. He claimed he was opposed to nuclear weapons as long as the Middle East was a nuclear weapon-free zone. However, as long as Israel possesses nuclear weapons (some 200-300 warheads in Berri's estimation), then every Muslim country has the right to develop nuclear weapons.

18. (C) Berri said he was very impressed with Ahmadinajad. He is very interested in dialogue with the USG on Iraq, Berri said, disputing the Ambassador's point that recent news reports suggest otherwise. Berri expressed hope that the USG and Iran will also discuss Lebanon and solve its problems. Berri said he had asked Ahmadinajad whether he would be willing to engage the USG on Lebanon, and he did not reply positively or negatively. The Ambassador asked whether Berri observed any concern in Iran about the prospect of international isolation over its nuclear program. Berri flatly replied: "They don't care. Iranians say the U.S. is always against Muslims."

BUSY MONTH AHEAD

19. (C) Berri said parliament had a very busy schedule for its next session May 3-31. Some 44 "programs" (presumably draft laws) were scheduled for debate. He said the cellular question may come up. The Hariri family is opposed to any reform. Minister of Telecommunications Marwan Hamadeh is a ready ally to block cellular phone reform, according to Berri, because he is close to Naseq Hariri. The Ambassador asked Berri if he anticipated any labor unrest in response to economic reforms. Berri replied that it a episode like the labor riots in France is possible. The labor unions will not accept being required to work more hours, he said.
FELTMAN